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A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES

ABSTRACT

From a narrative perspective, organizations' identities are discursive (linguistic) constructs constituted by the multiple identity-relevant narratives that their participants author about them, and which feature, for example, in documents, conversations and electronic media. By defining collective identities as the totality of such narratives I draw attention to their complex, and often fragmented and heterogeneous nature. My approach contrasts with much of the theorising in this field which has tended to homogenize collective identities by emphasizing what is common or shared, failed to capture the interplay between different communities within organizations, and produced bland, undifferentiated empirical research. In particular, the theoretical framework that I outline focuses attention on the importance of *reflexivity*, *voice*, *plurivocity*, *temporality*, and *fictionality* to an understanding of collective identities as locales for competing hegemonic claims. In combination, these notions form a unique conceptual model for theorising and researching collective identities. This said, a narrative approach also has its limitations, and is proposed as an additional, not exclusive, interpretive lens.

INTRODUCTION

What can a narrative approach contribute to our understanding of collective identity? Most current conceptual and empirical studies are indebted to Albert and Whetten's (1985) view that an organization's identity is what is *central*, *distinctive* and *enduring* about it, albeit usually with some modifications (*AMR*, 2000; Whetten and Godfrey, 1998). This seminal definition has spawned a wealth of research that has linked the identity of organizations to issues such as image and reputation (Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2000), decision making (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991), identification (Pratt, 1998), organizational culture (Fiol, Hatch and Golden-Biddle, 1998) and legitimacy (Brown, 1997). In this article, I argue that a narrative perspective on organizations can usefully complement and extend inquiry into the nature of collective identities and related processes of organizing. More specifically, I seek to outline a narrative approach that highlights key aspects of collective identities, some of which have been under-researched, others of which can be theorised in novel ways. An understanding of identity informed by narrative, I suggest, provides an additional interpretive lens that may open up new avenues for identity research, and assist scholars in their efforts to develop insightful theory (Rhodes and Brown, 2005).

The arguments I construct are embedded in what Fisher (1985) has referred to as the narrative "metaparadigm" (e.g., Masterman, 1970, p.65) constituted by scholars from a range of disciplines and traditions "whose work is informed by or centers on narrativity" (Fisher, 1985, p. 347), and who embrace pluralism, relativism, and subjectivity (Lieblich, Tuval-Masiach and Zilber, 1998, p.2). The linguistic turn in the social sciences and humanities has placed narrative centre-stage in such diverse disciplines as history (White, 1973), psychology (Sarbin, 1986), anthropology (Geertz, 1988) and philosophy

(MacIntyre, 1981). This "resurgence" of interest in narrative across the social sciences (Martin, 1986, p.7) has been embraced by scholars of organization, and narrative now figures in studies as mode of representation, social epistemology, and social ontology (e.g., Currie and Brown, 2003). Narrative, together with its cognates such as story, tale, account, myth, legend, fantasy and saga, has received attention from those who tell "tales from the field", collect "tales of the field", (Van Maanen, 1988), conceptualize organizations as storytelling systems (Boje, 1991), and engage in literary forms of "disciplinary reflection" (Czarniawksa, 1998, p.14).

This literature is, however, far from monolithic. Earlier (mostly functionalist) work tended to treat narratives as artifacts (Wilkins, 1979) and to abstract them in order to shed light on other aspects of organization such as socialization (Brown, 1982) and culture (Ott, 1989). More recent social constructionist and critical studies have variously suggested that narratives are the products of particular contexts and must be studied *in situ* (Gabriel, 1995), that fragments of narrative intertextually dialogue with, quote from and anticipate other narratives (Fairclough, 1992), and that organizations literally *are* narratives (Cooren, 1999) or *antenarrative* networks of dynamic and unfinished stories (Boje, 2001). Building on this later research, one strand of my argument is that a narrative approach is central to an understanding of organizations in general, and their identity constructs in particular, as locales symptomised by relations of domination and resistance, hegemony and control. It is by focusing attention on identity narratives, I maintain, that organizations can most easily be analysed as power effects (Foucault, 1977). Narratology, understood here to refer to "the theory and systematic study of narrative" (Currie, 1998, p.1), leads to an understanding of collective identities as multi-voiced, quasi-fictional, plurivocal and reflexive constructions that unfold over time and

are embedded in broader discursive (cultural) practices. These aspects are pivotal to an appreciation of narrative identities as complexes of in-progress stories and story-fragments, which are in a perpetual state of *becoming*, and suffused with power.

This paper draws on a tradition of research that analyses organizations as discursive spaces, i.e., opportunities for talking and writing, and the importance of these discursive practices for understanding processes of organizing (Coupland, 2001; Cunliffe, 2001; Samra-Fredricks, 2003). In particular, it is a selective exploration of the literature on narrative/story, (i.e. those forms of meaning-making in which actions and events are configured into linguistic wholes), and how this work might be used to inform analyses of the identities of organizations. My arguments are contained in four main sections. First, I consider current approaches to theorising collective identity and outline the narrative perspective that I am advocating. Second, using the notions of *fictionality*, *plurivocity*, *reflexivity*, *temporality* and *voice*, collective identities are theorized as sites of hegemonic struggle. Together, these features constitute an integrative conceptual framework that can be used to analyse collective identities in ways that have so far been under-researched and incompletely theorised. Third, some implications for theory and practice are drawn. Finally, some arguments 'for' and 'against' a narrative approach to collective identity are reviewed.

COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Taking as their point of origin Albert and Whetten's (1985) view that an organization's identity is what is central, distinctive, and enduring about it, collective identity has recently become a major focus for scholars. There is, nevertheless, considerable scope

for definitional disagreement, with identity at the organizational level also having been defined as, for example, how a collective understands itself as an entity (Pratt, 2003, p.165), "the theory that members of an organization have about who they are" (Stimpert, Gustafson and Sarason, 1998, p.87), and "the totality of repetitive patterns of individual behavior and interpersonal relationships" (Diamond, 1993, p.77). Attempts to make sense of this literature have resulted in the identification of quite separate functionalist, interpretive, postmodern and psychodynamic perspectives on identity issues (Gioia, 1998; Porter, 2001). Such analytic work suggests that while it is possible to treat identity as a metaphor for understanding collectives *as if* they had an identity (Pratt, 2003, p.167), most theorists have tended to deploy identity constructs which imply that organizations are super-persons/corporate actors (e.g., Cheney and Christensen, 2001), or which refer to putatively shared/common characteristics of organizations (e.g., Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997). Neither of these are entirely satisfactory as the former are prone to accusations of reification and anthropomorphism, while the latter make it difficult to distinguish identity from other shared properties such as climate and culture (cf. Whetten, 2002; Whetten and Mackey, 2002). A narrative approach offers ways of theorising that mitigate these problems.

What, then, is a narrative conception of collective identity? This is an important question because "identity - as an explanatory concept - is often overused and under specified", and this misuse is in danger of blunting the "potential utility of the concept" (Pratt, 2003, p.162, 163). Predicated on the idea that people are appropriately described as both *homo narrans* (Fisher, 1984, p.6) and *homo fabulans* - the tellers and interpreters of narrative - (Currie, 1998, p.2), my argument is that being predisposed to think in narrative form (Brown, 1986, p.73), the *reality* we construct is a narrative one (Mink, 1978). Narratives

are performative, they are speech-acts that "bring into existence a social reality that did not exist before their utterance" (Ford and Ford, 1995, p.544), and these stories "may be viewed as constitutive of organizational realities" (Boje, 1998, p.1). Organizations' identities are constituted by the identity-relevant narratives that their participants' author about them. Identity-relevant narratives are stories about organizations that actors' author in their efforts to understand, or make sense of, the collective entities with which they identify. From this perspective, collective identity is a discursive (rather than, for example, psychological) construct, and 'resides' in the collective identity stories that, for example, people tell to each other in their conversations, write into corporate histories, and encode on Web sites.

There are a number of features of this understanding of collective identity that we should note at the outset, many of which are further elaborated in other sections of this paper. First, organizations' identities will tend to be characterised by multiple narratives, of many different types. For instance, some identity-relevant stories will concern specific events or people while others will take the form of extensive corporate biographies. These narratives can be told from the point of view of the narrator or another individual or group such as shareholders or customers, may relate historical, current, or normative identities, and can take a variety of literary forms, including tragedy, irony and romance.

Second, social processes of networking, dialogue and negotiation, - combined with the general effects of socialization and the specific and often pervasive influence of leaders - often result in many shared storylines and themes within an organization. However, while some degree of shared storytelling about an organization's identity is a prerequisite for organized activity, it is often the case that different groups within a larger collective

will tell quite different stories about themselves and the institution in which they are embedded (e.g., Humphreys and Brown, 2002a,b). Concomitantly, although no organization starts its storytelling afresh each day, and thus there is often considerable continuity in stories and story themes in an organization, yet rarely is this storytelling wholly unchanging. As narrative constructions, organizations are emphatically not simple, monolithic or homogeneous. Rather, they are discursively polyphonic (Hazen, 1993) or heteroglossic (multi-languaged) (Rhodes, 2001) entities in which individuals and groups simultaneously and sequentially trade in narratives. One strength of the narrative perspective is that it does not insist that collective identities must be shared, or are always fragmented, or must be discontinuous or are mostly enduring. Rather, it recognises that the extent to which any given organization is characterised by narrative consensus or dissensus, and the rate at which the content of identity stories alters, are empirical not theoretical issues, and cannot be assumed *a priori*.

Third, the general narrative approach that I outline here can be refined into a variety of distinct story-based conceptions of collective identity. For example, an *aggregate* model in which collective identity appears as the summation of shared stories and story themes might be developed. Similarly, a number of different kinds of gestalt models in which collective identity might feature as an emergent property of the relational ties that bind a storytelling system together could be elaborated (cf. Pratt, 2003). In this paper, however, I regard the identities of organizations as being constituted by the totality of collective identity-relevant narratives authored by participants. This conception permits recognition that collective identities are most often complicated discursive constructs, with some shared elements, but also replete with contradictions. It also allows us to unambiguously locate organizations' identities in the identity-relevant stories told about them, which

may take, for example, documentary (reports and corporate histories), oral (conversations and speeches) and electronic (Web sites and e-mails) forms.

The identities of organizations are, perhaps, best regarded as "continuous processes of narration where both the narrator and the audience formulate, edit, applaud, and refuse various elements of the ever-produced narrative" (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994, p.198). The very fabric of organization is constantly being created and re-created through the elaboration, contestation and exchange of narratives. What is more, the strands of this fabric are not produced 'unthinkingly', but woven by reflexive agents with individual as well as group-level aspirations and beliefs. The fabric is both a patchwork quilt of narrative episodes stitched together through shared conversations, and rippled, with stories variously borrowing threads from each other, continuing and extending some, and seeking to unravel others. Some of these narratives are deeply embedded in central folds of the fabric, with many ties to other stories, while others occupy peripheral positions connected to one or a few stories only. Some are highly elaborate, with well-drawn agents, actions, context and plot, while others are partial, fragmented, and terse (Boje, 1995). The result is a fabric that is in a constant state of becoming, unravelling in some areas, embroidered over in others. At times much of the fabric may appear relatively coherent and consistent, as consensus on the meaning of important actions and events dominates, while at other times the fabric may take on a knotted or frayed character as different individuals and groups contest narratively what is truly distinctive or really enduring about their organization.

THEORIZING NARRATIVE IDENTITIES

Participants in organizations are enmeshed in multiple simultaneous commitments, (based on, for example, age, race, gender, department and so forth), that create complex webs of mutable interdependencies and interconnections. These webs are not hermetically sealed but form a dense trans-communal network that fosters narrative exchange. Storytelling in organizations is especially evident within particular strong-tie clusters such as work groups, departments and divisions, and in sanctioned catch points like scheduled meetings and briefings (O'Connor, 1997). But it is not confined to these, and casual meetings across turf boundaries, unauthorised e-mails, and chance encounters may often be equally rich in storytelling events. 'New' stories constantly proliferate, and people spend much of their working lives interpreting, re-framing, evaluating them, and countering with versions of their own. Individuals and groups are engaged in reciprocal and dynamic, if asymmetric, power relationships in which multiple socially constructed realities exist in tension (Pfeffer, 1981). These narratives form an intertextual (self-referencing) network (Browning, 1991, p.191) of competing hegemonic claims that mobilise and reproduce the active consent of others (Clegg, 1989; Gramsci, 1971).

Organizations are "domains of legitimate authority" (Mumby and Stohl, 1991, p.315) fractured by disputants who struggle to bolster their own status and authority and to avoid being labelled as negligent, irrational or unnecessary. Narratives are a potent political form that dramatize control and compel belief while shielding truth claims from testing and debate, and command attention and memory, often without exciting argumentative challenge (Witten, 1993, p.100). Yet narratives are not merely political tools or "legitimating devices" (Mumby, 1987, p.114) but the primary means by which organizations are discursively constructed and reconstructed as regimes of "truth".

Narratives structure systems of presence and absence in organizations, insinuating particular sets of meanings into everyday practices that are represented as authoritative while excluding alternative conceptions (Hall, 1985, p.109). In a Foucauldian (1977) sense, narratives are a form of discursive practice that does not merely provide the contextual apparatus for the exercise of power over those in organizations, but functions as a disciplinary form that constitutes organizations and their participants in particular ways. As Clegg (1989, p.183) observes, "To the extent that meanings become fixed or reified in certain forms, which then articulate particular practices, agents and relations, this fixity is power".

Within organizations, dominant individuals and groups often attempt "to impose their own monological and unitary perceptions of truth" (Rhodes, 2000, p.227) regarding, for example, what is fundamental, uniquely descriptive, and persistent about a collectivity. While hierarchical privilege confers many advantages – such as access to information, control over communication channels, and the right to participate in decision fora – it is not a guarantee of hegemonic dominance. Most theorists recognise that all participants can draw on a broad range of discursive resources in authoring versions of themselves and their organization, and that ambivalence rather than subjugation is the most likely result of attempts at identity-imposition (e.g., Oglensky, 1995, p.1042). A large number of 'micro' empirical studies have found that employees engage in a range of oppositional strategies in their attempts to create physical, emotional and symbolic space for themselves in organizations, including the use of rumour and whistle blowing (Jermier, Knights and Nord, 1994), and cynicism (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). 'Macro' research on attempts to impose collective identities has tended also to emphasise the extent to which seemingly peripheral and unprivileged workers are in fact able to contest

effectively the power of elites by authoring counter-narratives (e.g., Humphreys and Brown, 2003a,b). In short, in complex organizations, no individual or group's hegemony is ever total, and their control over discursive space is never complete.

To summarise, not only is the narrative form uniquely suited to "render complexity with complexity" (Mink, 1978, p.131), but narratology is especially concerned with questions that implicate notions of power. In particular, a narrative approach encourages theorists and researchers to ask about, for example, the genesis of identities (how did a narrative come to be told?), ownership (who is telling a narrative?), the motivations of the narrator (for what purpose(s) is a narrative being told?), the intended audience (to whom is a narrative addressed?), and the context of the narrative (e.g., how does a narrative relate to other versions of an organization's identity?). To underpin adequately investigation of collective identities such questions need to be complemented by a sophisticated understanding of identity narratives. This is a considerable task to which this paper is designed to contribute. Here, I consider issues centred on the notions of *reflexivity, voice, plurivocity*, *temporality,* and *fictionality*, which in combination constitute a conceptual model for analysing collective identities as the grounds "on which the struggle for power is waged, the object of strategies of domination, and the means by which the struggle is actually engaged and achieved" (Westwood and Linstead, 2001, p.10). While each of these ideas has received attention from scholars, the contribution of this paper is to consider them as a set of distinct but related analytical tools and to deploy them to further our understanding of collective identities.

Reflexivity

Collective identities are reflexively accomplished by participants, where reflexivity refers to 'that which turns back upon, or takes account of the self' (Holland, 1999, p.464). These narratives are "figured" (Ricoeur, 1991, p.80) or "worked on" in dialogue with others, both real and imagined (Ezzy, 1998, p.246). Collective identity is a "reflexive concept" (Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2000, p.76), in the sense that it is through processes of reflexivity that organizational members understand, explain and define themselves as an organization. This reflexive narrativization of identity is an "imposition", but it is an act of power that privileges the agent, suggesting the possibility of narrative authenticity and transformative creative self-construction. Reflexivity is potentially liberating, releasing us from the poverty of servitude to fixed and unitary notions of organizations' identities. It is made possible by our capacity for "creative deviancy" (Worthington, 1996, p.102), which we realize both through chance permutations of discursive rules, and as a result of intentional personal agency.

There is, however, no organizational "essence" to which participants have privileged access and which they are then reflexive about. The identity of an organization is a linguistic construct, and participants are reflexive within the discursive quasi-constraints imposed on them by language in general, and in particular by the narratives on which they draw, and to which they are subject. Boyce's (1995) study of a religious organization shows that collectives which demand compliance with a rigid set of predetermined shared meanings encourage a form of reflexivity that is self-confirmatory and self-satisfied, rather than exploratory and developmental. Organizational leaders may devise powerful univocal collective identity narratives that diminish the scope others possess for the reflexive authorship of alternative versions (e.g., Rosen, 1985).

Consultants to organizations can, through their provision of diagnoses of supposed ills, and new sets of metaphors and labels for understanding, profoundly influence the ways in which reflexive self-authorship develops (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994). Dutton and Dukerich's (1991) analysis of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, illustrates how external stakeholders can author stories that lead to particularly acute and highly directed periods of collective self-reflexive questioning. Reflexivity is integral to continued processes of identity adaptation, but the capacity for reflexivity is not a guarantee of it, and the directions and forms it takes are only partially determined by participants.

Voice

Narratives are narrated (written/voiced) by authors from a particular point of view, for a particular audience, and are thus imbued with motive (Burke, 1945). Stories do not tell themselves, they are told by storytellers, and are "a product of contingent human construction" (Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001, p.999). They are emphatically not "unsponsored texts" (Harris, 1989) "to be taken as existing unintentionally as if cast by fate…" (Bruner, 1991, p.10). Early studies of narratives in organizations were insensitive to the issue of voice, and to the performative and contextual aspects of storytelling that it implicates (e.g., Wilkins, 1979). More recent studies have been preoccupied with the identity narratives sponsored by senior executives and principal stakeholders (e.g., Scott and Lane, 2000, p.44), though there is growing recognition of the importance of the "microstoria" (Boje, 2001) of putatively junior and marginal participants in organizations (e.g., Gabriel, 1991). The point is that there are as many narratives of a collective's identity as there are participants in it and scholars who observe a narrative unity in organizations do so only by focusing on the voice of one

agent or group that they take to represent the whole (Cooren, 1999, p.302). Yet as Boje's (1995) *Tamaraland*[1] metaphor makes clear, it is often possible to attend to other agents, and to follow their discursive constructions through different performances in different scenes and at different times.

Collective identity narratives, then, are articulated in accord with some set of purposes or interests, and such stories are inherently political, establishing *positions* from which flow social consequences. Versions of an organization's identity are intrinsically controversial, and have always to be negotiated and "legitimated in an ongoing dialogue of the people who form the organization" (Taylor, 1999, p.324). Yet unless there is some degree of consensus on what is central, distinctive and enduring, an organization's status as an organized entity is itself open to question. Organizations are polyphonic (Hazen, 1993), but the result is not necessarily cacophony, in part because those who are symbolically privileged use their advantages to promulgate identity narratives that foster certain understandings at the expense of others. These may, of course, be rejected rather than authenticated by a community, and, in any case, in many organizations even the authority to speak *officially* is contested by, for example, different board members, unions, long servers, and independent-minded division heads. Nevertheless, as in the case of cooperatives, in which compete accounts of them as businesses with a utilitarian mission, and communities with normative commitments to cooperation, solidarity and egalitarianism (Foreman and Whetten, 2002), debates centred on a collective's identity tend to coalesce around a relatively small number of common themes. Different voices need not author collective identity narratives in unison, and the result may not be harmonious, though the ensemble of voices most usually blends into an organized, if

highly differentiated and sometimes fragmented, whole (cf. Parker's (2000) analysis of organizations as 'fragmented unities').

Plurivocity

Plurivocity (multiple understandings of stories) refers to the fact that not only do organizations tend to have multiple identities (Pratt and Foreman, 2000, p.20), but that each individual identity narrative is itself susceptible to a potentially limitless number of interpretations. Identity narratives, as with other sorts of narrative, are typified by the fact that "there is no single *basically* basic story subsisting beneath it, but, rather, an unlimited number of other narratives that can be *constructed in response to it* or *perceived as related to it*" (Smith, 1981, p.217). Different people may simultaneously tell different stories to each other, and the same people sequentially tell different stories in various spatio-temporal contexts. For example, business school academics often author competing collective identity narratives that differentially balance the competing priorities of teaching, research and consultancy, depending on whether their audience consists of other scholars, students or corporate clients. Much of the time, competing versions of organizations' identities seem to co-exist unproblematically. This said, as with private hospitals in which some participants are more focused on patient care and others on investor returns (Foreman and Whetten, 2002), and cultural organizations, whose participants are split between concerns with normative artistry and utilitarian economics (Glynn, 2000), hybrid identities may often be a source of creative tension and debate. Accounts of Intel's metamorphosis from a memory chip company to a microprocessor company, however, suggest that there can also be times when incompatible identity narratives contest acutely the future of an organization (Grove, 1997).

For individuals, plurivocity is a necessary condition for the flexible presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) and, additionally, is seemingly empowering, because it appears to allow organizational participants to create their "own" interpretations of actions and events (Thatchenkery, 1992, p.231). Plurivocity is vitally important for organizations, providing their participants with the capacity to author for them the requisite identity variety they require to meet the expectations of multiple internal and external stakeholders (Nkomo and Cox, 1996). This said, the credulity of audiences always imposes definite, if not always clearly defined, constraints on the sorts of narratives that people can author about their organization (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). For example, Nike's official identity narratives suggesting that it is an exemplary employer have prompted ridiculing counter-narratives that contradict such claims, particularly with regard to its labour practices in Asia (e.g., Stutts and Barker, 1999). It is also apparent that although few, if any, collective identities are totally monolithic, many organizations are characterized by sets of stories that have certain commonalities, such as key themes, core events and imposing personalities. Even in an organization such as Disneyland, the identity of which is contested both by dissonant internal and critical external voices, Walt Disney's "official story and singular worldview dominate[s]" (Boje, 1995, p.1031). Powerful centripetal forces that co-opt the plurivocal possibilities latent in any official version of an organization's identity for their own purposes, tend often to be countered by equally powerful centrifugal forces that close down, marginalize and exclude them, thus maintaining and repairing the hegemony of elites.

Temporality

"Temporality" is integral to the concept of narrative, which literally refers to "an account of events occurring over time", and hence is "irreducibly durative" (Bruner, 1991, p.6).

Following Ricoeur (1984), we may say that the abstract concept of time becomes meaningful to human beings to the extent that it is organized as a narrative, and reciprocally, that narrative is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience (cf. Jameson, 2001, p.486). Collective identity narratives are often accounts of how organizations have evolved, and collective identities are generally best described as "morphogenetic" (Willmott, 2000) or "dynamic" (Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2000). Even apparently stable official identity narratives, such as those of LEGO (Cheney and Christensen, 2001), are infinitely revisable, and always provisional, works-in-progress that facilitate the collective experience of temporal continuity, though without achieving permanence, stasis or closure. There is recent evidence for an increased interest in time in organization studies (e.g., *AMR*, 2001), and some field research on collective identity has adopted a longitudinal approach (e.g., Dutton and Dukerich, 1991), though less attention has been paid to how temporality is socially constructed, and deployed hegemonically, in the authorship of collective identities.

Notions of temporality are often incorporated into collective identity narratives in ways that support the (perceived) interests and prejudices of their authors. Narratives are not simply transparent, atemporal vehicles which carry pre-given meanings, but are the product of authorial and reader impositions at a particular historical juncture (Worthington, 1996, p.76). Further, *time* is an extremely flexible narrative resource that can be squeezed and expanded, made to seem episodic or linear, and imposed upon to create beginnings and endings which, in turn, define eras of supposed progress and regress, order and chaos. Bhaba's (1989) analysis plausibly suggests that nations author self-defining narratives that create the impression of historical continuity and homogeneity to which immigrants, as late additions, are pedagogically and

performatively excluded. Most university-based business schools in the UK are subject to dominant bureaucratic accounts in which they are depicted as newcomers, with a disciplinary base that is un-established and inchoate. Thus is temporality a feature of collective identity narratives, with the power to reify social orders, to legitimate the asymmetric resourcing of functions and departments, and to ignore the claims of those marginalized in the telling.

Fictionality

Collective identity narratives are fictive histories. While they are largely constructed from experiential and putatively historical data, they tend not to be comprehensive, consistent and precise, but to contain lacunae, imprecisions and non-sequiturs. Every story about an organization is "edited" (Dunne, 1995, p.153), even those we tell to ourselves, and so is always a work of imagination, a discursive construct fraught with hermeneutic uncertainty (Worthington, 1996, p.161). In part this is because there is always a gap, temporal and conceptual, between those who author, and those who are told a version of, an organization's identity. Recognition of the quasi-fictional status of collective identity narratives allows analysis of the ways in which participants author collective identities freighted with their partisan understandings and desires. Senior managers at Cadbury, for example, commissioned corporate histories that emphasized the role that Quakerism had played in making the company an enlightened welfare-oriented employer, despite the "fact" that Quaker employers in the UK had at first opposed progressive legislation (Hassard and Rowlinson, 1993). Harrison's (2000, p.427) study of a psychiatric hospital suggests that *every* participant in an organization authors their own subtly different quasi-fictional version of it in keeping with their

"slightly different set of individual value orientations, professional positionings, life experiences, and class, race, gender, and age differences".

This said, no individual or group has *carte blanche* to author identity narratives in any fashion whatsoever. Collective identity narratives will always be constrained both by authors' understandings of what constitutes a reasonable and plausible story, and by the expectations and counter-narratives of their co-authors and audiences. As individuals, and in groups, participants in organizations act as checks and balances on each others' versioning of the collective's identity. If, as in O'Connor's (1997) study of a defense manufacturer, senior leaders author an identity narrative which features a (non-existent) "open door" policy, then others are likely to retaliate with stories about top management's corruption and its immunity to access. The capacity of participants for collective self-authorization is also restricted by networks of external stakeholders (such as customers, suppliers and competitors). To ignore them, as Shell's leaders did until the late 1990s, during which time they marginalized issues of human rights and environmentalism in their official identity narratives, is to risk accusations of illegitimacy and possibly outright sabotage (Livesey, 2001). In the extreme, where a large number of participants subscribe to a highly idealized version of their organization's identity, the consequences, as Schwartz's (1990) analysis of the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster illustrates, can be catastrophic. The identity narratives of organizations may be quasi-fictions, but "Only in fantasy do we live what story we please" (MacIntyre, 1981, p.199).

In summary, organizations are storytelling milieu in which shared, mutable communicative protocols facilitate intersubjective understanding. The term *organization* denotes a symbolic rallying point, or spatial metaphor, that refers neither to a concrete set of social assumptions nor a fixed geographic location, but a discursive *space*. Narratives of an organization's identity are reflexively produced by participants engaged in their own authorial self-narration. Voices jostle constantly with one another for dominance and narrative control, each seeking to impose its understanding of an organization's identity, and to variously delete, over-write, and undermine others. In such processes, silence as well as vocalization may be an effective narrative strategy. Every agent's hegemonic reach is circumscribed by other agents, who can choose to interrupt, ignore, contest and deride others' narratorial performances. A global consensus on identity issues is possible, but is also always fragile and generally fleeting. Shared storylines develop only to dissolve again as they are re-worked by narrators with different perspectives and authorial skills at different times and for different audiences (Alderfer, 1987). What is more, interpretation is always unstable and, while order and meaning are generally detectable, identity narratives resist definitive closure.

All collective *texts* are fractured into oral and written variants, and many have Web- and video-based narratives, all of which occupy different temporal spaces. Even in a single storytelling event, chronology may be jumbled as characters and events from the past and projected futures, or indeed from other narrative frames and alternative worlds, descend into the constructed present. Temporality is not merely a feature of narratives that permits comprehension of sequentiality, but a resource for narrators engaged in the hegemonic task of setting boundaries which determine who is included, who is excluded, who is core and who peripheral. A narrative approach reveals collective identities not as

reified objects or as rarefied illusions (Baudrillard, 1983), but as in part discovered and partially invented quasi-fictions. They are, though, quasi-fictions with consequences, making experiences of particular kinds possible. For example, an official identity narrative that particularly stresses the importance of maintaining good relationships with suppliers makes it difficult to renege on a deal. Difficult, perhaps, but not impossible. There is, after all, always another story that can be told.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A narrative approach suggests that collective identities are constituted by the narratives that their participants author about them. As discursive constructs, they have existence in the continuing conversations, e-mails, Web sites, internal reports and videos etc. in which narratives of the organization are swapped and embellished, resisted and accepted. This perspective leads to a more nuanced understanding of collective identities which recognizes that what is held to be central, distinctive and enduring is the result of competing hegemonic forces. It suggests that any one identity narrative stands, and acquires meaning, in relation to a network of others, that there are many voices in organizations, and that no individual's account has a monopoly on the *truth*. The identities of organizations are reflexively accomplished quasi-fictions generated by individuals who are motivated to relate storylines that serve their (perceived) interests. Rather than a single identity, organizations are constituted by multiple intertextually networked narratives. Of the many implications a narrative approach has for theory and practice, I shall briefly consider six.

First, most current conceptions imply that organizations have identities. From a narrative perspective, however, collective identities are fundamentally discursive (linguistic)

constructs that are not in some way intrinsic to organizations, but constitutive of them. The narrative approach neither reifies organizations nor, necessarily, focuses on shared or common features. Collective identities are constituted in the organization-centred discourse of participants, and researchers need to pay attention to the linguistic sites in which identity work is done. Importantly, it recognizes that, as with the reorganization of the US Postal Service in 1971, identity narratives can, to an extent, be imposed on participants by coalitions of external interests (Biggart, 1977). To analyze an organization's identity means asking who is saying what to whom, when, in what contexts and for what purposes? It crucially involves being sensitive to issues of power and control, hegemony and resistance: does the CEO author different versions of the organization's identity for different stakeholders? What do corporate histories and web sites gloss over, or omit? Whose account of the organization's identity is most pervasive? The key notions of reflexivity, voice, plurivocity, temporality and fictionality together constitute a conceptual model for analysing collective narrative identities. They invite exploration of questions such as: what conditions maximize identity plurivocity? In what circumstances is temporality most prone to manipulation for political ends? Are some collective identities less, and others more, reflexively produced than others?

Second, a narrative approach suggests that we regard the extent to which an organization's identity is in flux or enduring as an issue to be decided empirically. There is a sense in which collective identities are always in a state of becoming because identity narratives figure in on-going conversations between participants. Yet some stories of an organization's identity may endure for long periods, perhaps by being systematically re-told to new recruits during processes of socialization, while others exist only fleetingly. Certain themes, major protagonists and watershed events may feature in many versions

of an organization's identity for years, but changes in circumstances and personnel mean that very few stories and story fragments survive for decades. Those fragments that do persist for long are always prone to reinterpretation, to be pared down, revised, and co-opted into other stories. As Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2000) note, while the identity labels (and we might add the identity stories) that characterise an organization can remain relatively fixed, their meanings for participants may alter. Few narratives are written down, and those that are tend frequently to be updated: web sites are constantly re-designed, last year's annual report is soon discarded. Even a founder who is prominent in an organization's identity narratives of the 1860s may be all but forgotten in the narratives of participants a century later (Brown, 1991). As with the YMCA, where official identity narratives have been re-authored to emphasize not evangelism but general service, these revisions can be extraordinary and profound (Zald and Wallace, 1963). Empirical research is required to answer questions such as whose identity stories survive longest? Why do some storylines persist for longer periods than others? Do some sorts of story - epic, heroic, romantic tragic or comic – have a higher attrition rate than others?

Third, theoretical and empirical research is needed to establish the implications of a narrative approach for issues centred on individual-organization identification. Defined as a "perception of oneness or belongingness to some human aggregate" (Ashforth and Mael, 1989, p.21) organizational identification occurs "*when an individual's beliefs about his or her organization become self-referential or self-defining*" (Pratt, 1998, p.172). 'Identification' is evidently a shorthand label for complex psychodynamic (Diamond, 1993, p.90), cognitive (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), emotional (Pratt, 1998, p.180), and sensemaking (Weick, 1995) processes. But how do these processes of

identification relate to the narratives that participants author regarding an organization's identity? Are these identity narratives appropriately thought of as evidence for identification, or are they constitutive of identification? Studies such as Golden-Biddle and Rao's (1997) analysis of a non-profit organization suggest that participants author contradictory collective identity narratives that can lead to intra-role conflict. Yet how are these contradictions and conflicts resolved narratively? Is it by authoring collective identity narratives, or perhaps other sorts of narrative, that members define and re-define actively their relationship with their organizations, (re)-centring themselves (Bowles, 1989) as ambivalent, detached, or committed (Elsbach, 1999)?

Fourth, there is a need for research to consider how organizations' identities, conceived narratively, link conceptually and empirically to notions such as *construed external image*, i.e., participants' perceptions of how outsiders view their organization (Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994), and *reputation*, actual outsider perceptions of the organization (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990). Most current accounts treat identity, image and reputation as distinct concepts, while allowing for interaction between them. For example, identities are said to influence reputations (Gioia, 1998), and, reciprocally, reputations influence both construed external images and identities (Elsbach and Kramer, 1996). A narrative approach evokes a still more complicated picture of simultaneous and sequential, inter-linked and often competing identity, image and reputation narratives authored by a mix of internal participants and externally located stakeholders. But is it only official identity stories that shape the reputation stories of external stakeholders, or are the cross-border story exchanges of lower-level employees as (or more) influential? Whose stories, external stakeholders or senior executives, are the most important determinants of how ordinary employees frame their organization's construed external

image? Are antecedents such as industry type, national culture and organization size important factors that shape and constrain these identity dynamics?

Fifth, the considerable attention on narrative that has been paid by scholars across the social sciences and humanities has resulted in a reservoir of theories and frameworks that organization theorists can draw on in their efforts to understand processes of organizing. The work of literary theorists (Frye, 1957), communication theorists (Mumby and Stohl, 1991), and folklorists (Georges, 1969) among others, may have much to offer our field. The more so because the narrative metaparadigm draws adherents from a range of traditions, such as structuralism (Barthes, 1977); post-structuralism (Foucault, 1972); critical theory (Habermas, 1984), post-analytic philosophy (MacIntyre, 1981) and hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1982), mirroring the fragmented nature of organization studies.

Finally, a narrative approach to collective identity has some important implications for practitioners and those who teach them. Foremost among these is the recognition that collective identity may be conceptualised not as something material or psychological, but as a discursive construct. This is important because it helps draw attention to the importance of language both as a medium for management and an outcome to be managed. A narrative perspective also makes it clear that, in any organization, there will generally be multiple versions of its identity, and that this plurivocity is not necessarily problematic or a sign of bureaucratic failure. Indeed, some degree of identity-pluralism (requisite variety) may be adaptive, especially for organizations operating in unstable, fast changing environments. As Brown and Starkey (2000, p.103) note, “learning to promote critical reflection upon collective identity is a crucial but under-theorized management task”. Thus it is clear that the management of multiple collective identities

is a key task of management, and "their controlling members must be concerned about how to (re)present the organization as a whole" (Cheney, 1991, p.14). Perhaps the most effective way of doing this is for managers to ground their preferred narratives of their organization's identity in what most organizational participants perceive to be their best interests (Cheney, 1991).

CONCLUSIONS: FOR AND AGAINST A NARRATIVE APPROACH

To conclude, in this paper I have sketched an approach to theorizing and researching collective identities which suggests that they are discursive (linguistic) constructs constituted by the multiple identity-relevant narratives that their participants author about them. By defining collective identities as the totality of such narratives I have drawn attention to the extent to which they are best regarded not merely as complex, and often fragmented, but suffused with power. In so doing, I have built on what is, arguably, an emerging consensus that narratives can "open valuable windows into the emotional and symbolic lives of organizations" (Gabriel, 1998, p.135) and yield "knowledge unavailable through other methods of analysis" (Stutts and Barker, 1999, p.213), in ways that may enable organization theory "to reinvigorate itself" (Czarniawska, 1998, p.13).To analyze collective identities from this perspective means focusing on issues of *reflexivity*, *voice*, *plurivocity*, *temporality*, and *fictionality*, which in combination may be regarded as a conceptual model that may guide both empirical research and further theory-building in this field.

A narrative approach to the study of organizations can be defended on psychological, ontological, epistemological, methodological, representational and analytical grounds. Narrative psychologists insist that a focus on narratives is required because stories

underpin our cognitive and emotional lives as agents of memory (Bower and Clark, 1969), emotion (Lazarus and Alfert, 1964), and meaning (Bruner, 1990). It has been argued that social and historical events have an intrinsic *narrative structure* which ontologically require comprehension in narrative terms (Carr, 1986). Other theorists have suggested that storytelling research should be epistemologically privileged because it produces a unique form of knowledge about processes of organizing (Stutts and Barker, 1999). A methodological focus on narrative, in many guises, has been recommended as the way to generate reflexive, multi-voiced, and non-linear accounts of organizations (Boje, 2001). As a representational strategy the narrative form has been positively associated with accounts which are "impressionistic" (Brown and Kreps, 1993, p.54), or "verisimilitudinous" (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Most champions of a narrative approach point out the utility of narratives as means for expressing considerable complexity, temporal sequencing, indeterminacy and ambiguity, and other supposedly hard to capture characteristics of human action (Reddy, 2001).

Not everyone has found these arguments entirely convincing. It has been argued that the terms *story* and *narrative* are so contested that some dispute whether it is in fact possible to construct a general narrative approach at all (Currie, 1998). Sarbin's (1986) suggestion that narrative might become a root metaphor for psychology has met with more scepticism than acceptance. Most theorists argue that narrative qualities do not inhere to human events but are transferred from art to life, and some maintain that nominally explanatory narratives constitute an escape or diversion from *reality* (Mink, 1978). There is also a widespread recognition that, in organizations, the hegemony of narratives is challenged by lists and statistical data, and that due regard needs to be paid to the role of metaphors (Tsoukas, 1991), argumentation repertoires (Sillince, 1999),

and rhetorical devices (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993) in processes of social construction. In literary theory it is widely agreed that there are "many kinds of stories, little agreement about which ones are best, and less agreement about what they mean" (Martin, 1986, p.27). In personality psychology, "…despite years of research…surprisingly little is actually known about the origin, nature, or function of life stories" (McCrae, 1996, p.355). Frequently, the study of narrative "has been criticized as being more art than research" (Lieblich, Tuval-Masiach and Zilber, 1998, p.1). As Sarbin (1986, p.11) has observed:

> "Because storytelling is commonly associated with fiction, fantasy, and pretending, some critics are sceptical about the use of the narrative as a model for thought and action. For the serious scientist storytelling is related to immaturity and playfulness".

Some of these disputes symptomise irreconcilable paradigmatic assumptions while others may be resolved through empirical research. Rather than an indication of the flaws in a narrative perspective on organizations, I regard these differences in emphasis and opinion as signs of the vital debates that currently centre on the utility of narratology in the social sciences and humanities. Nevertheless it is important to recognise the limitations of a narrative approach to understanding and theorising collective identity. For example, its emphasis on identity as a discursive construct and power effect is likely to limit its appeal to a particular scholarly community. For many academics, the fact that a narrative approach makes it all but impossible to measure collective identity using survey methods makes it extremely unattractive. Moreover, while its embrace of considerable complexity and unlimited plurivocity is, in some respects, admirable, it is also potentially confusing. This complexity, and its associated scope for confusion, can to some extent be resolved by choosing to privilege the narratives of, for instance, leaders, but this begs the question: why then adopt a narrative approach? It should also be noted that this perspective has

little to offer psychologists interested in identity episodes such as identity crises, splits and moratoria, and says nothing about the psychodynamics of narrative production or the motivations for self-esteem, self-knowledge and self-improvement that may underpin such language work.

As long as we remember that "every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing" (Burke, 1965, p.49), a narrative approach can be a valuable addition to the organization theorist's lexicon of interpretive schemas. Narratology, like all other single frameworks is necessarily limited, directing attention to some phenomena and inviting the use of a particular vocabulary, while shielding attention from other possibilities. Of course, not all approaches are equally generative. Not all collective identity narratives (or theories of collective identity) are of equal worth. The most valuable ideas are those that allow us to "maximise what we see" in organizations (Weick, 1987, p.122). A narrative approach is a "terministic screen" (Burke, 1989) that casts collective identities as sites of hegemonic struggle. Identities themselves are depicted as discursive constructions, which may be unstable, are often contradictory, and are always shaped and constrained by the limited repertoire of available and sanctioned stories (Ezzy, 1998). This view represents a challenge to the many functionalist, and often monolithic, (or sometimes bi- or tri-partite), accounts of collective identity that privilege the views of senior executives and researchers. It invites, instead, both more demanding and more diverse stories of organizations and their identities.

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Note

[1] Tamara is Los Angeles' longest running play in which a dozen characters enact their multiple stories. Instead of remaining stationary the audience fragments into small groups in order to pursue different cast members into different rooms and floors so that each individual member of an audience may follow different storylines and form a different understanding of what is going on.